

Bonding by pathvain_aelien

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Summary:

Eleven hangs out with the guys, sans Mike.

Bonding

It's Friday, at 1 pm.

That particular day and time are very important in the Hopper household, because it's when Days of Our Lives comes on. It's on every day except for the weekends, but Friday is the most important day. Something exciting always happens on Friday. Hopper will occasionally miss a Monday, when nothing ever happens, but as the week crawls by, he makes it a point to be home for lunch every day. Ostensibly it's because he's sort of a father now, and Eleven needs the company. It's just a coincidence that lunch always happens at 1 pm, at least since Eleven moved in.

That's what he tells himself every day, anyway. Every day at 2 pm.

Eleven already has the TV on and she's sitting on the couch. She's made their lunches today since Hopper is late, and the sandwiches rest expectantly on TV trays. She's been waiting politely and hasn't eaten hers yet, because of manners. She's pretty hungry, though, and figures that manners expire after a certain amount of waiting. She will wait until the show starts, she decides, but no longer. Because it's also manners-bad manners- to be late, and Hopper is definitely late.

The hourglass appears and Eleven immediately reaches for her sandwich. She feels a little guilty and decides that she will save the chips until Hopper's here. That's a compromise. Halfway happy. Within a few minutes she's immersed in the story and doesn't look up until the first commercial break. She glances toward the door, then the clock. She finally notices one of her kittens, curled up on Hopper's TV tray. Right on his plate, actually. He appears to have fallen asleep on the remains of the sandwich. She thinks of it as remains because he's pulled the ham out from under the bread and eaten it.

She quickly snatches the kitten-as of yet he doesn't have a name, she just thinks of him as the Will kitten-and places him in her lap. Hopper will be really cranky if he sees a cat anywhere near something edible. Eleven is well aware of this, because it's a subject that makes him cranky every evening at dinner. She has no problem

sharing her food and her plate with her kittens, but Hopper yells that it's disgusting and unhygienic. Once she understands the latter word, she vehemently disagrees. There is nothing unclean about her kittens. She's noticed that they bathe themselves regularly throughout the day.

Eleven hurriedly fixes his sandwich, at least as well as she can without moving away from the TV. Maybe he won't notice that it's only cheese and mayo now. Or maybe he is busy and will miss lunch completely. As soon as she thinks it, she hears footsteps on the porch and the door is thrown open. She jumps when he enters because he looks a little frantic.

"What's...what's wrong?"

Hopper tosses his hat in the general direction of the coat rack. It's followed by his jacket. Eleven's eyes follow their progress to the floor. Hopper is usually not very neat, but it's not really normal for him to just throw his hat, either. He must like it a lot because he wears it all the time.

"Nothing, just running late. Old man McGill wanted to report his glasses stolen and wouldn't take no for an answer, even though they were on his head the whole damn time." He sighs.

Sometimes he misses being a cop in a big city. The excitement of doing something important, something that mattered. Although he's certainly had plenty of excitement in Hawkins over the last year.

Hopper starts to plop down in front of the TV when he realizes he can't move. He's stuck in an absurd position, bowed at the waist, behind sticking out, as if he has suddenly been struck by terrible stomach cramps. He shoots a glare at Eleven. She glares right back. Scoops up a kitten from behind him.

"You almost sat on him," she tells him angrily. He feels a little guilty; he just keeps forgetting that they are apparently cat people now. And they are everywhere. All of the time. It seems like the 4 have multiplied because there's always at least one around. Not to mention the massive amounts of cat hair floating around like tumbleweeds. Once the kitten has been deposited to the safety of Eleven's lap, she

releases Hopper. Hopper sits down and grumbles something that sort of resembles an apology. She sniffs and he hands her his napkin automatically.

“What’d I miss?” he asks. He’s already lost fifteen minutes. On a Friday. It’s safe to ask, because a dish soap commercial’s on.

Eleven wipes her nose as she answers. “Carly isn’t dead,” she says, balling up the napkin. She tosses it on the floor; because she figures Hopper won’t mind. He was throwing things on the floor earlier, after all. The Lucas kitten lunges for it immediately.

“What?!” Hopper nearly shouts. “But they buried her!”

Eleven shrugs. “Bo and Hope are back together but he doesn’t know Carly’s alive,” she adds.

“So she didn’t have cancer?”

“No. Roman did it. He didn’t want her to be with Bo. No one knows she’s alive.”

Hopper hastily turns the volume up and reaches for his sandwich. He’s eaten three bites before he realizes there’s not actually anything on it but cheese. He doesn’t mention it, doesn’t want to hurt her feelings. It’s only her first time making their lunch. He’s halfway through before he feels something odd, something that most definitely shouldn’t be in a sandwich. He pulls a wad of fur out of his mouth and nearly gags. He sets the sandwich down and peers at it closely. Now he can clearly see the little paw prints embedded in the bread.

“Eleven.”

She doesn’t respond, just glances at him.

“Eleven.”

“...yes?”

“Keep your cats off the food. I mean it. Or they’re gone.” He shakes the bread in one hand, drawing her attention to it to illustrate. The

Mike kitten in his lap gets excited by the motion and darts at it. He nudges it away from his hand gently. He is suddenly aware that there's a kitten on his shoulder. There's a kitten on Eleven's shoulder. There are fucking kittens everywhere.

"Cat lady," he growls under his breath. The show comes back on and he turns the volume up again. Carly is still stuck in the coffin, and she's running out of air. Eleven doesn't pay any attention to this because she's remembered something. Something Hopper once said.

Just promise me you'll watch other things besides the soaps, okay? Unless you want me to get you a bathrobe and a couple of cats, anyway.

She still doesn't understand exactly what he meant. But she is watching what he calls the soaps. And she has a couple of cats. More than a couple, because a couple means two. She doesn't understand the innuendo but she's clear on one point.

"I need a bathrobe?" It's half a question, half a statement.

Hopper slowly turns his face towards her, keeping his eyes on the TV until he absolutely has to look away. "Huh?"

"You said if I watched this, I need a bathrobe. And cats."

He just stares at her blankly for a few seconds until he remembers. He's torn between sighing and laughing. "Oh."

"I have cats," she points out.

"So you do, kid."

"I need a bathrobe," she repeats.

Hopper looks around the room. Cats everywhere. Cat toys everywhere. Cat hair everywhere.

"I'll get us both a couple of bathrobes, how about that?" He sighs. Turns back to the TV. Bo has finally figured out that Carly is still alive, but she's suffocating. There's still 20 minutes left and he hopes it resolves this week, because nothing ever happens on a Monday.

He's completely absorbed, sharing a bag of chips with Eleven, when the phone rings. They both ignore it but it just keeps ringing.

"Kid. Phone."

"No."

"Come on, I missed the first few minutes, you can miss a few, too."

"No. That was your fault."

That's undeniably true, and he falls silent. The phone is still ringing. The sound is very loud and she can barely hear the TV. She sighs, and gives in. Hopper doesn't even see her go. Eleven snags the phone from the wall, stretching the cord as far as it can go to keep an eye on the show.

"Hello?" Bo is frantically digging, trying to reach the coffin.

"Hi, El!"

She immediately forgets all about Bo. It's Dustin, and Dustin has never called her before. Mike calls her. Will calls her. And those are the only people who call her.

"Dustin?"

"Yeah! Hi. What's up?"

Eleven looks up. It's just the ceiling, a little faded and yellowed from all the cigarettes. She can't see anything else on it.

"The ceiling," she replies. He laughs, as if she's said something funny. It bewilders her completely. Why is Dustin calling and asking her about ceilings?

"Anyway, we need you."

"Why?" Her tone is suddenly sharp. She realizes that he's called her when he should be at school. Are there monsters? Bad Men? Bullies? "My...you know?" she asks, cautiously. Hopper has warned her about what not to say over a telephone. Telekinetic powers are definitely on

the list.

“Nope, just a good old-fashioned feminine opinion.”

She distantly hears someone in the background but she can't make out the words. “Oh...okay,” she says. She has no idea what he means, but it's certainly not normal. It's a new thing. She has trouble with new things.

“Can you come over, like now? “

“But...school?”

“Nah, Christmas break, remember? We're over at Will's house. Hopper knows how to get here.”

“Hopper?”

“Yeah, can he drive you? He's home right now, right?”

She glances back at Hopper. Hopper is shoveling chips into his mouth. He's watching the TV so intently he doesn't seem to notice that some of them don't actually make it to their intended destination.

“Yes. He's busy.”

“Busy? I'm just like, 5 minutes away. You could walk here if he'd ever let you actually do that. What's he doing?”

“Watching TV.”

“Shit. This is kind of important, can't he miss it this once?”

“No. He likes it.”

“What show is it?”

“Days of Our Lives.”

A silence falls. She can't hear anything. She thinks maybe he hung up, because she couldn't come over. Maybe he's mad at her? She pulls the phone away from her ear slightly, ready to hang up, but

then Dustin speaks and she places it against her ear again.

“Did-did you just say what I think you said?”

“What?”

“What did you just say?”

“I said, ‘what?’”

“No, no, no. The name of the show.”

“Oh. Days of Our Lives.”

There’s another silence. When he breaks it, he sounds gleeful.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“No?” She asks, because she isn’t sure what the problem is. She’s completely bewildered when Dustin starts to guffaw. She waits for him to stop. She has to wait very patiently, because it seems to take an extremely long time. When he speaks, he sounds like he can’t breathe.

“Oh...kay. Ca-can you ask him to...bring you over here...af-after? After his...story?” Each pause is accompanied by a gasp. He’s still laughing for some reason.

“I don’t know. I’ll ask.”

Eleven pulls the phone away from her ear and stretches it back toward the living room with her.

“Hopper?”

“What?” He sounds irritated at the interruption.

“Can you take me to Will’s?”

Hopper seems to have not heard her. “You’re missing it, kiddo. Bo is seriously thinking about just running off with Hope even though his first wife was just buried alive,” he calls loudly. That is interesting and it temporarily distracts her.

“No. Hope is his first wife,” she calls back.

“No, Hope is the third wife!”

“No. It goes: Hope, Carly, then Hope. Again.”

“What about Billie?”

She has forgotten about Billie.

“I don’t know,” she says, perplexed. When she hears Dustin hiccuping with laughter, she remembers what she was supposed to ask Hopper in the first place.

“Hopper! Can you take me to Will’s, when Days of Our Lives is over?”

Hopper finally glances over. Sees that she’s on the phone. Replays what she just said. What he just said. He gapes like a fish. “You... want to go to Will’s?” He asks it with horror. He sincerely hopes that Joyce never finds out about this.

“Yes. When Days of Our Lives is over,” she says, confused as to why he’s suddenly making wild arm motions. “Why are you doing that?” she asks, puzzled. He zips a finger across his mouth, and she doesn’t understand that either. “Just...don’t mention the show any more on the phone, okay?” he whispers. She has no idea why it’s suddenly not safe to talk about TV over the phone-that’s never been one of the words they can’t use- but she nods agreeably.

“Fine. I’ll drop you off.” He turns back to the TV, but he seems to have lost his enjoyment.

“Okay,” she tells Dustin.

Dustin is still snickering.

Dustin slowly places the phone onto the receiver. Will and Lucas have been watching him curiously for the last few minutes, and he turns to them immediately.

“What? Is she coming?”

Dustin doesn't respond. Can't respond, because that would require oxygen he currently doesn't have. Dustin just gives them a thumbs-up instead and leans against the wall. He's completely out of breath and his eyes are gushing tears.

"What was so funny?" Will asks him.

"Guys. You are not going to believe this. It's awesome."

Less than a minute later, they are all howling with laughter. Dustin can't take it anymore. His legs are weak and he slowly slides bonelessly to the floor, still cackling. "Man," Lucas breathes to Will, in between fits, "Your mom sure isn't going to go for him now."

A few minutes later, their laughter has dried up. Mostly. It reignites every time one of them makes eye contact with each other. There's a tentative knock at the door and Will hurries to let Eleven in, since he's mostly regained his composure. When he opens the door, he sees that Hopper has evidently decided to stay in the car. Will waves at him but he's determinedly not making eye contact. He drives away quickly before Eleven is even inside.

"Hey, El," he says, giving her a hug. She hugs him back tightly. She's learned to appreciate every moment she has with her friends, just in case. "How are the cats?"

"Good," she says, and smiles at him. Smiles at Lucas and Dustin, who've come into the living room to greet her.

"Pick any names yet?" Lucas asks.

"No. Not yet." She scans the room slowly, taking careful inventory. There's nothing out of place. No monsters. No Bad Men. "Why...why did you need me?" she asks them. Lucas and Will look uncomfortable (and a little ill) but Dustin takes the lead.

"Glad you asked, I'm glad you asked," he says happily. "These two have hot dates, and they need a female opinion."

Lucas and Will both splutter. "We do not have dates!" Lucas grumbles through clenched teeth.

“Hot...dates? What are hot dates?”

Lucas cuts his eyes knowingly towards Dustin. “Why don’t you ask Mike that,” he asks, sniggering slightly. Eleven doesn’t understand why she can’t ask them, but that draws her attention to the fact that Mike isn’t actually here. She looks at Will.

“He’s at the dentist,” he says instantly, and she returns her attention to Dustin.

“Anyway, basically, Will and Lucas here are going to hang out with a couple of girls at the arcade,” Dustin says.

“Just as friends!” Will interjects quickly. Dustin rolls his eyes.

“Riiiiight. Anyway, they’re going to hang out with a couple of girls, just as friends, but they want to dress up. You know, look nice. For their friends.” Lucas punches him and Dustin hits back.

“Oh...kay.” It’s not quite a question.

“So we need your opinion. Because they have been seriously losing their shit,” he adds.

“Why?”

It’s Dustin’s turn to look bewildered.

“Because you’re a girl. So you’ll know.”

“I will?”

Lucas raises his eyebrows to Dustin. “I told you,” he sing-songs. El is one of his best friends, and he likes her a lot, but she’s not exactly normal. She thought it was perfectly okay to get naked in front of three guys. She was happy wearing Mike’s ratty clothes for a week. Presumably, that was her first time wearing real clothes anyway. She doesn’t know anything about fashion.

Dustin sighs. “Yeah, you can just, like, tell them if their outfit blows, okay?” He sees the slightly scared look on her face at this sudden responsibility. “No big deal, it’s a group effort, all right?” She nods

and relaxes a little. "All right, guys, strut your stuff!" He pulls Eleven down on the couch next to him and looks at them expectantly.

"Dustin."

"What?"

"I told you, we are not going to have a freaking fashion show over here," Lucas snaps.

"And I told you, if you're going to make me sit here and help you pick an outfit, you're going to do it in a way that I can make fun of. Plus you brought like, a shit-ton of clothes over here."

Lucas sighs. Hanging his head, he walks quickly around the couch, before standing in front of them again.

"WELL?"

"I think it'd be better if you start from the kitchen," Dustin tells him helpfully. "I'd really be able to judge the clothes that way."

"Asshole," Lucas snarls, and stalks toward the kitchen. Will follows him, trying not to laugh.

"Wait until I announce you!" Dustin shouts, before turning to Eleven. "Have you ever seen a fashion show?"

"What's a—"she starts.

"A fashion show is where a bunch of people just like, walk around in new clothes and people stare at them."

That explanation makes absolutely no sense to Eleven. "But...why?"

Dustin shrugs. "I guess to make people buy those clothes."

"No...why would people watch them?"

"No idea," he tells her breezily. "Let's find out. Get comfortable. You comfortable?" She nods, and he settles in. Props his feet up on the coffee table. "Okay, here he is, dressed in the latest from Paris, Lucas

Sinclair!”

Eleven watches the kitchen, but nothing happens.

“LUCAS! MOVE YOUR ASS, MAN!”

“I will seriously kill you for this,” Lucas says faintly.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Anyway, Lucas Sinclair!”

Lucas grudgingly emerges from the kitchen and approaches them while Dustin commentates. “Would you look at that. Sinclair has daringly paired blue jeans with a red and yellow crewneck T-Shirt,” Dustin mutters to Eleven as Lucas circles the couch again. There’s an oddly murderous expression on his face and Eleven feels a little nervous. He comes to a halt in front of them.

“Well?”

“Maybe one more time? From the kitchen?”

“Dustin. I will fucking kill you, I swear. We are running out of time. I am not going to fucking walk into the kitchen and walk back here to show you the same clothes I’ve been wearing all fucking day. And you’re a horrible friend,” he adds as an after-thought.

“Fine. Let’s ask the judges.” He has no idea if fashion shows actually have judges, but what the hell. Dustin turns to Eleven. “Well? What do you think?”

Eleven looks at Lucas uncertainly, then back to Dustin. “Nice?”

“The judges are not impressed. Let’s see what else you’ve got. NEXT!”

Lucas grumbles and walks jerkily toward Will’s room.

“And now...we have something really special for you, ladies and... well, just ladies, I guess. Someone who has made an amazing comeback this fashion season. It’s Will Byers, all the way from the Upside Down!”

The snarls emerging from Will’s bedroom sound remarkably similar

to that of the Demogorgon.

“DUSTIN! ENOUGH! WE ARE NOT GOING TO HAVE A FASHION SHOW!”

“Will has to do it at least once, because YOU did. Plus it just, like, helps with the flow, since you’re changing and Will’s just standing there,” Dustin yells.

“Dustin! If you ever want to see your X-Men comics again, you will shut the hell up!”

“Fine! But Will still has to do it once. BYERS, GET IN HERE!”

Will strolls in casually, looking a lot more at ease than Lucas. Lucas was clearly incensed but Will is snickering. He actually feels a lot less nervous now, so he’s grateful for that, at the very least. He completes his rotation around the room and pauses in front of them.

“Can you just like, do that model pose that they do?” Dustin asks him. Will laughs and obliges, and Eleven breaks into giggles. She doesn’t understand exactly what’s happening, but it’s somehow hilarious and she suddenly can’t do anything except giggle helplessly. They’ve heard her laugh before, but this is the first official laughing fit. Dustin beams happily. Mission accomplished, as far as he’s concerned, since he’s forgetting the actual mission at hand. “Okay, El, what do you think?”

“No.”

“No? Why no?”

She points to the hem of his shirt. It’s stained with what appears to be pizza sauce.

“Shit,” Dustin says. “That means you have to do your walk again,” he screeches as Will heads back toward his room to change. He smiles at Eleven’s laughing face. Too bad Mike isn’t here, he thinks.

Lucas tries on four more outfits before the party vote is unanimous. He utterly refused to participate any further in Dustin’s game, and Dustin is still sulking. It’s the only aspect of this that was actually

fun. Once he's received their seal of approval, Lucas sits on Eleven's other side and waits for Will. It takes them a lot longer to choose his clothes, because most of them are either a little too worn or have stains. He's almost given up until Lucas tosses him a handful of shirts. "Just try mine on, they're only a little bigger," he says. Will materializes moments later from his room, wearing khakis and a red shirt.

"No," Eleven says immediately.

"Why not? I thought it looked okay," Will asks.

She points to his khakis.

"What's wrong with them?"

"Stains."

"Shit. Where?" He turns his head to check the backs of the legs, but they seem pristine.

"Not yet. But there will be," she says.

The guys look at each other. "She's right, you're going to be eating at the arcade. Even if YOU don't spill anything, chances are you'll be sitting in like, an old nacho puddle or something anyway. They never clean that place," Dustin tells him. Will sighs and ducks back into his room.

"Good call, El," Lucas says admiringly. She smiles at him, then focuses her attention on Will as he reenters the room. Light blue jeans, dark blue shirt. Lucas and Dustin shrug. They've both lost interest, and Dustin never had much to begin with.

"It looks okay," Lucas says.

"Yeah...not bad."

They turn to El, who's studying Will carefully. The dark blue shirt makes his pale skin look even paler, but in the good way. A healthy way. It makes his eyes look nice, too.

“Pretty,” she says, definitively. They all glance at her.

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Okay then, there you go. All set,” Dustin tells Will.

“Thanks, El,” he says, smiling.

“See? I told you, feminine opinion,” Dustin mutters to Lucas. Lucas shrugs as Will tries to wedge his body next to him at the end of the couch. “Uh, dude, what are you doing?”

“What?”

“You’re dressed. Time to go.”

Eleven watches with interest as they instantly look nervous. And a little sick.

“Um,” Lucas says, intelligently.

“Go, guys,” Dustin orders. Neither of them make a move toward the door, so he stands up and pulls both of them with him. Forcibly marches them towards the door. He tries to remember what Steve has told him about dates. Dates with actual girls. “Wait! Okay, dating advice. Straight from the master. Okay, so, like, pay for their stuff,” he says, then trails off. What else did Steve say?

“Hold the doors open,” he adds. Another pause. Eleven suddenly remembers the way Mike rushed to open the door for her, even though he knocked everything off the table. Was that a date? What is a date? Or was that just good manners? She tries to think it through because she senses she can’t ask Mike himself. A date has something to do with girls, girls that are not friends. Or are they? Lucas is friends with Max, and that’s who he’s meeting. Or are they more than friends?

“Separate if it goes well, stick together if one of you sucks and you need back-up.”

“Ask them to the Snow Ball if it doesn’t suck.”

The Snow Ball is in two weeks, right when they go back to school. It’s a change from last year, when it was before the break. Eleven wonders if Mike will ask her again. If he will ask her soon. He hasn’t mentioned it at all. Dustin pulls open the door and ushers the guys out. They both wave at Eleven and thank her. She returns the wave, still thinking about the Snow Ball. About dates.

“Oh! “ He’s finally remembered the other thing Steve told him about dates. “No glove, no love!”

They both pause. Will is still only halfway on his bike. “No glove, no love? What does that mean?” he asks bewilderedly. He turns to Lucas, “Do you know what that means?” Lucas shakes his head, and they look back at Dustin. “What gloves?”

Dustin shrugs. “No idea, it’s just what Steve said. Maybe, you, like, bring them gloves? When it’s cold?” The guys consider this carefully.

“Maybe?” It kind of makes sense. “Sometimes you’re supposed to give her a jacket if it’s cold. Right? Maybe it’s the same thing?” Will asks. He does have his gloves, because it’s frigid today.

“Uh, why wouldn’t they just bring their own?” Lucas asks, but Dustin shrugs again.

“I have no idea. I’ll have to ask Steve.”

“Shit. I didn’t bring my gloves,” Lucas moans, frantically checking his jacket pockets.

“Don’t worry about it this time. You guys will be inside anyway, so it shouldn’t matter.”

“But Steve said we need them!”

“Just forget about the glove thing for now, I guess. Do the other things, though. Good luck!”

He watches them wheel away from the house. Eleven has joined him at the door. She’s watching him, not her other friends, because he

looks a little sad. A little disappointed. As if he has the lonely Eleven feeling. As soon as he notices her concern, he rearranges his face into a cheerier expression.

“So...” He trails off. He’s just realized that he and Eleven are hanging out at Will’s house, and Will isn’t even here. Plus, he’s never hung out with Eleven alone before. It’s a little strange, but he rolls with it. He’s good at that.

“Want to go to my house?” When she nods, he locks the door behind him. He doesn’t think about calling Hopper, because she hasn’t even been here that long anyway. And maybe he’s watching another soap, anyway. He sniggers briefly. Besides, it’s a quick walk to his house, and she can crush people’s brains and everything if there’s any trouble. He’s pretty nonchalant about it, to be honest. As they walk, he tries his best to make her laugh again.

A few minutes later, they’re in his house and she’s peering around with interest. She’s never been here before. She smiles at the photos of Dustin on the walls. Dustin himself is staring at her awkwardly. Yep, still a little weird. He casts his mind about for something to say, or do. He decides the best way to smooth over any awkwardness is to be his most hospitable self.

“So! Allow me to give you a tour,” he says, taking her by the arm and propelling her forward. “That’s the living room, bathroom over there, mom’s room, yadda yadda. My room over here.” He’s marching her around the house. “Kitchen! You want a snack?” He’s already pulling open the cabinets. He hit the snacks pretty hard yesterday, playing his new Atari games. “Sorry, no Eggos,” he tells her, and she laughs softly.

“Aha!” He’s found the last box of Nilla wafers. He usually doesn’t share them, especially when his supply is nearly depleted, but what the hell. She’s a special guest. He can be a gentleman. He hands them to her generously. “That’s basically my Eggos,” he tells her. “Want to watch TV?” She nods and follows him into the living room, but there’s no TV. She looks at him curiously.

“Oh, yeah. I wheeled it into my room so I could play games last night,” he says. “Come on.” She obediently follows him again and

looks at his room with interest. She's never been in Will's room, and she's never even been in Lucas's house. She was in Mike's room once, but only in the closet, and that doesn't count. He has a lot of Star Wars stuff. A lot of books. She picks up something black and heavy. "That's my microscope, you use it to look at things and see them really well," he tells her, and demonstrates.

When they're finished, he throws himself onto the bed onto his stomach. He doesn't think twice about having a girl in his room, because while she's a girl, she's not a girl, not to him anyway. She's just a friend. "Want to watch TV, or want to play a video game? Have you ever played one before?" She shakes her head. "Want to try?"

"Okay," she says. She copies his position on the bed and he hands her a controller. She gives him a Nilla wafer. Pretty soon they're engrossed in the game. Eleven really likes it. It's difficult, but Dustin keeps up a running commentary and makes a lot of jokes. She laughs a lot. They take a break while Dustin makes a soda run. Eleven has consented to try it this time, and Dustin knows that Hopper will just be thrilled about the impending dental visit. He gleefully hands one to her as he shuts the door to keep the cat out. They dump the Nilla wafers onto the bed in between them so they're easier to reach while they're playing. Eleven takes her first sip of Coke. Dustin watches her reaction with almost clinical interest. Initially, her face is drawn together in wary disgust, as if he's handed her poison. By the time it's actually in her mouth, her eyes are wide with surprise.

"It's...it's really good!"

"I know, right? They're awesome. And there's like a whole bunch of different ones. Pepsi is really good, too. Kind of the same, but different." He watches her drain the can quickly. "Just don't drink like, more than one of those a day, and not before bed," he says wisely. "Cavities." He laughs at the mournful expression on her face when she realizes it's empty. She stretches her arm out in front of her and places it on the floor, before putting her arms under her face. She turns to regard him when he copies her position.

"Dustin?"

"Yeah?"

“What was wrong? At Will’s?”

He knows exactly what she means. “Nothing, really. It was no big deal.”

“Dustin.”

“I know, I know. Friends don’t lie, etcetera, etcetera. It really is nothing, though.”

“You can tell me,” she says. He gives her a little smile because she looks so concerned. It’s sweet. It would be nice to talk about it, maybe, and she doesn’t tease. Maybe she can’t, because of what she’s been through. And she’s always understanding.

“It’s just...like, I kind of feel like I’m being left behind,” he says. She says nothing, just waits for him to continue. “Like, Lucas really likes Max, and so did I. It’s fine that she seems to like him, but Will likes Jennifer, and she likes him...” He’s about to add and Mike has you, before he reconsiders. He has no idea if they’ve ever actually talked about it before, although it’s pretty obvious. To everyone. Maybe not to Eleven, though? He isn’t sure, and Mike would kill him, so he doesn’t continue that sentence. “It’s just that, you know. No one likes me,” he says instead. He sees her start to retort and adds, “a girl, I mean.”

“I like you,” she says honestly. It’s true. She does. He has always been on her list, since the very first day.

He grins at her, pleased. “Thanks, El. But I meant like, as, you know, more than friends.” It’s surprisingly easy to talk to her about it, because she’s just so nice. Serious. He appreciates gravity, even if he can’t always be that way himself. Talking to her makes him a hell of a lot less worried about feeling like an idiot.

“Dustin. They will,” she says softly.

He quirks an eyebrow, joking even when he isn’t. “Well, they haven’t yet. And it would be kind of nice to have a date to the Snow Ball. I mean, Lucas and Will are probably off sucking face right now, and meanwhile I’m just, like, nothing. Left behind.”

"You are not nothing," she says, immediately. Then she processes the rest of his sentence. "What's...sucking face?" It sounds unpleasant, and she doesn't understand why her friends would want to do it.

Dustin laughs at her expression. "It means they're probably kissing. With Max and Jennifer, I mean, not each other." She doesn't say anything so he tries to explain it a little better. "Kissing is, um. What you do with people you like," he starts, but she interrupts him quickly.

"I know what kissing is."

"Oh. Okay." He's thinking of TV. They probably suck face pretty frequently on Days of Our Lives. He snickers again. Then he reconsiders. Maybe he shouldn't ask her, but he can't resist. Curiosity killed the cat, and all that. That makes him think of Mews, and he repressed a shudder. "Um...how do you...know what kissing is?"

"Mike."

He goggles at her. No fucking way. Mike has never, ever mentioned it. His own problems are temporarily forgotten in the wake of this new development. But maybe it's not a development. She asks a lot of questions, and could easily have just asked Mike what kissing is.

"Mike. Okay. You asked him? I mean, he told you?"

"No."

He goggles again. He can't help it.

"Did he...he kissed you?"

"Yes."

"What? When? How many times? When? Where? When?"

Eleven is starting to feel concerned because Dustin suddenly looks funny. Not normal. Maybe she shouldn't have told him? Maybe it's private? Dustin sees her hesitation and hastens to reassure her. He feels a little guilty about it, because he is sort of taking advantage of the fact that she's a little lacking in social norms. But he can't resist.

This is interesting. "It's okay! You can tell friends anything! And I'm your friend." He doesn't bring up the fact that Mike is his friend, too, and Mike has certainly never breathed a word about any kissing.

"Last year."

"LAST YEAR?" He was definitely not expecting that. "When? I mean, when last year?"

"Before the Bad Men came. And the Demogorgon."

"At the school?"

"Yes."

"Shit. Where were we? I mean, we were there that night, too."

"Getting pudding," she says, enunciating the word clearly. She's still never tried pudding.

Dustin doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. Jesus. No wonder Mike never said anything. It must have happened approximately one minute before everything turned to shit. "Just that once?" he asks, just to be sure. They have been doing that whole mind-meld thing lately. A lot. He sees her pause again.

"Yes. Once." She decides to not mention the night she returned, because it doesn't really count, does it? They didn't actually kiss that night.

"Wow."

There's a slightly awkward silence. He can tell Eleven is feeling uncomfortable now, so he attempts to steer the conversation elsewhere. "Um. Okay. So anyway, Will and Lucas are probably off doing that, with girls that like them. And it's cool. But, you know, it would be nice if a girl liked me."

"They will." She's suddenly feeling fiercely protective of him. She knows exactly how he is feeling. Different. It's a very lonely feeling. She wants to make that feeling better for him, if she can. That protectiveness causes her sentences to be a lot longer than they

normally are, unless she's talking to Mike. "You're nice, Dustin. Very nice. And funny. You're just good," she says emphatically. "And...you don't make other people feel different. Feel bad. And you're brave," she says.

He snorts and starts to shake his head but she's surprisingly firm. "You are. The day with the bullies. They would have hurt you but you didn't want them to hurt Mike. That was brave. You helped keep me safe from the Bad Men. Carried me. Didn't run away. And...Max likes Lucas best. She likes you, she just doesn't like you best. But someone will. Someone will like you best." She thinks for a minute, then smiles a little and says what he always does. "You are awesome," she says.

He's staring at her open-mouthed. For her, that was pretty much a soliloquy. He smiles, and she smiles back. "Thanks, El," he says, softly. Seriously. Then the moment passes and he grins. "When you put it that way, I am kind of a badass. The ladies will love me," he jokes. They are still grinning at each other when the door opens and Mike walks in.

"Hey! I knocked," he says, closing the door behind him. He turns around and just gapes, in complete and utter shock. Eleven and Dustin are lying right next to each other. Companionably. On his bed. The casual familiarity of it surprises him. She's never even really been in Mike's room, let alone just hanging out with him on a bed. Alone. In an empty house. Eleven looks wholly at ease, and completely happy. He tries to remember if he was more or less surprised when she slammed a door shut with her mind. He can't recall. He can only gawk at them.

"Hi, Mike," she says, smiling at him. He attempts a weak smile in return, but it doesn't really work. Dustin watches him with amusement. Mike's face is completely white and his mouth is gaping open like a freshly caught fish. His eyebrows are somewhere in the vicinity of his hairline.

"Hey, man," Dustin says easily.

"What...what are you guys...up to?" Mike croaks lamely.

"We're bonding," Dustin tells him happily. Mike shoots him a look that's half-rage, half-confusion.

"...bonding?"

"Yep. Just talking about the Snow Ball." He can't resist. Mike just looks too hilarious right now. The look is now 100% rage, as if Mike thinks Dustin has asked her to the ball. Dustin chokes back a laugh.

"What. What...about it?"

"Nothing," Eleven says. She's still feeling protective of Dustin. She senses that Dustin would have talked to the guys, but didn't feel comfortable doing so. Mike gives her a pained glance that she doesn't understand. She stands, gives him a quick hug hello. He returns it weakly, glaring daggers at Dustin over her shoulder. Mike looks like he's about to puke, Dustin notes. It makes him takes pity on him.

"Hey, El. Want to finish our game later? I've had you all to myself all day," he says, because he can't resist getting one more shot in, pity or not, "and Hopper should be picking you up from Will's soon. Mike can walk you back over there, if you want."

"Yes," she says. She looks expectantly at Mike.

"Oh! Can you put the Nilla wafers back in the kitchen? I've got to find this comic I borrowed from Mike," Dustin lies. He gathers up the surviving wafers from the bed and shoves them back in the box. She looks at her friends curiously, but accepts the wafers and exits.

"What the hell are you doing," Mike hisses immediately.

Dustin holds up his hands. "Nothing, man, chill out. This look isn't good for you, either," he says. "Stick with the idiotic smile, if you have to pick one."

"Do you...do you...you...I..." The sentence is clearly going nowhere.

"Take your time," Dustin says kindly.

"You don't...do...you don't...you don't like her, do you?"

“Of course I do! I like her a lot.”

“...you do?” It comes out as a wheeze.

“Yep.”

Mike falls silent. It appears that he is all out of words. He settles for scowling.

“But not like that.”

“...No?”

“Nope.”

Mike starts to feel a little better, and then he remembers something significant.

“You gave her your Nilla wafers!”

“I was being nice! Jesus.”

“Are you...are you sure?” Now he feels a little abashed. If Dustin did like her that way, it wouldn't be a big deal. Right? Lucas and Dustin both liked the same girl. It would be okay. Unless Eleven returned the feeling.

“Yep. Just friends, man.”

Mike breathes a little easier.

“We needed her opinion. Lucas and Will were like, losing their shit over what to wear, so we called her.”

“Oh.”

“Then we came over here to hang out until Hopper could pick her up.”

“Oh.”

“We played video games. Talked. You know, like friends.”

“Oh.” He feels a lot better suddenly. And of course he wants Eleven to be friends with his friends. They are all becoming closer, and it’s been awesome. He just wasn’t expecting a solo hang-out. In a bedroom. Alone. With someone that isn’t Mike. Mike abruptly sits next to Dustin, because his legs aren’t working anymore.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?”

Dustin rolls his eyes so hard it actually hurts. “Um, no reason. No reason at all, Mike. No reason, including the completely obvious one that you want to ask her to the Snow Ball.” Mike doesn’t say anything. “Just do us all a favor and do it already. Jesus. We all know you asked her last year, we were all there. Just because a monster was about to break in doesn’t mean we all went deaf. Just do it already before you, like, have a stroke or something.”

Mike still doesn’t say a word so Dustin elaborates for him, helpfully.

“Seriously. Your eyes were like, about to shoot out of your head and across the room.”

Mike looks at his feet. Notices the empty soda cans. Two empty soda cans. His head snaps back up. “She drank a coke?” The words sound a little strangled.

“Yep.”

He’s out of words again. She has always refused soda. Always. Even Mike hadn’t been able to sway her, that day at the bowling alley. She drank one with Dustin! He isn’t sure how to feel about that. He should be happy. He is happy. Sort of. It means she’s healing. That she’s happy. It also hurts that she chose to try it without him, the person she usually feels safest with. With someone else instead. And that makes him feel like a horrible person, to be bothered by such a trivial thing. He tries to focus on the happy feeling instead. He is happy that she’s healing. Yep. He’s happy that she’s bonding. With someone. Someone that isn’t him. He’s feeling a little nauseous again.

“There you go again,” Dustin sighs, watching Mike’s pale face turn a

delicate shade of green.

Eleven's been gone for a long time. She could come back any second. If Mike's going to say it, he has to hurry. "What if...what if she doesn't want to go? With...with me?" He mutters it quietly, just in case. Dustin cracks up, laughing harder than when he found out about Hopper's little guilty pleasure.

"Oh Mike," he wheezes. "You're such an idiot."

"Shut up."

"Seriously. She said yes last year!"

"That was last year. She was nearly dying and almost completely drained. She was out of it. And she didn't even know what it was, anyway."

"She certainly knows what a kiss is."

Mike's mouth starts opening and closing wordlessly again and Dustin groans.

"Not from me, numbnuts. You."

Mike's coloring starts to change from green to red. It looks festive, Dustin notices with interest. Very Christmassy.

"She...told you?"

"Yeah, I mean it was completely accidental, but she did mention it."

"Oh." A pause. Then, hopefully, "did she say anything else?"

"If you mean, did we gossip like a couple of teenage girls about how goddamned cute you are, then no. No, Mike. No, we did not."

"Oh. Then that doesn't mean anything," he said bleakly.

"Jesus. Mike. You are such an idiot."

This conversation can continue for eternity, it seems to him, but they are interrupted when the door opens. Mike looks at Dustin

imploringly, willing him to keep silent. Dustin raises an eyebrow. No problem. "What took you so long?" he asks instead.

"I was waiting for Mike," she answers.

Dustin tilts his head and looks at Mike. Raises his eyebrows again. He doesn't have Eleven's powers, but Mike can almost hear him, anyway.

You are such an idiot.